

Narrative by Judith A. Gray

Those of us who were on Capitol Hill Tuesday morning believe that we probably owe our lives to the passengers on the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania while en route to D.C. (Since the Capitol, by law, is the tallest structure in the heart of D.C., if the terrorists were after the most damage to the most symbolic structures, the Capitol would have been the most obvious target for that particular plane — and a strike on it would have had devastating effects on the immediately adjacent Congressional office buildings, Supreme Court, and Library of Congress.)

Friends called to report that something was happening in New York City. By the time I joined colleagues around a TV, the 2nd tower had been hit — and then the word came regarding the Pentagon about 3 miles away. The local newscasters started saying that the White House and the Capitol were being evacuated. From the windows of the Folklife Center, we could see people running out of the Capitol — and then, back on TV, the horror of the first collapsing tower. The evacuation notice for us came several minutes later. In the meantime, we were all frightened by the sounds of low-flying jets — it turned out that those were the military planes being scrambled, some “escorting” the remaining commercial flights that were to land at National Airport.

By the time we all left the building, there were already riflemen on top of the Supreme Court (there may have been some on the roof of the Library, but I didn't see them), and there was gridlock on the streets. Those of us walking to the Metro stop at Union Station found that it was closed due to a bomb scare (the information we got was that the whole Metro system was shut), so we continued walking in our respective directions, hearing additional rumors along the way (the false report that a car bomb had gone off at the State Dept., for example). Cars and buses were hardly moving. I eventually heard that the Metro system was, in fact, open, though certain stations were closed. When I entered the

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system, however, I saw very few people: many had not received word that the Metro was operating; others told me they were simply fearful of being underground.

All of the federal buildings re-opened on Wednesday. Getting to work was a challenge due to all of the blocked-off streets, the cars being searched, the IDs being doubly and triply checked, etc. There are still some blockaded streets by the Congressional office buildings, but the traffic patterns are basically back to normal, and the White House is even open to tour groups again. Flags are everywhere. And tomorrow people will be delivering thank-you notes and goodies to local fire departments, as a small way of conveying gratitude for their presence.